

Advent 4B
December 24, 2017
Luke 1:26-38

Where God Dwells: The Virgin Birth to the Incarnation

In the name of the One whose coming we await. Amen.

Fifteen years ago, I was in the middle of my seminary education.

I was studying theology and hermeneutics, singing in the choir,
and washing dishes in the refectory for minimum wage.

We gathered in the chapel every day at noon for worship,
students, faculty, and staff praying together as a community.

Also during that time,

I was struggling to work out issues of faith, personal belief, and conviction.

I vividly remember going home for Christmas that year

not knowing that it would be my last holiday spent with my grandfather
before his death later that spring.

One afternoon, some of us were casually gathered in the kitchen, as families tend to do,
and my grandpa was asking about what I was learning at school.

First, we talked about Jesus, then Mary, and eventually the virgin birth.

“Well, you know that’s obviously not true.” I declared
with youthful arrogance and condescension.

“The virgin birth is clearly a fable or metaphor.”

I saw the hurt in my grandpa’s eyes.

I saw his kindness, his love for me, his disappointment. But it didn’t change my mind.
My 23-year-old hubris knew no bounds.

When I think back to that day, that conversation, do you know what I remember?

Not much. I remember my sinful pride and arrogance.

I remember feeling a little embarrassed for my grandpa,
one of the smartest guys I’ve ever known,

one of the most faithful men I’ve ever known

embarrassed because he clearly believed in the virgin birth.

Do you know what I think now? I think he was right.

In the past fifteen years, something has happened to me and I have changed my mind.

My grandpa didn’t change my mind. Seminary didn’t change my mind.

Being a priest all these years didn’t change my mind. So, what was it?

Why didn’t I believe in the virgin birth then? And why do I believe in it now?

Do you believe in the virgin birth and does it even matter?

I believe in the virgin birth because God is bigger than you or me or even our reality.

God is mysterious just as the world is mysterious

and **I have chosen to believe in the mystery.**

Do I think that anything I say today is going to change your mind
and convince you unequivocally that the virgin birth did indeed happen
not as a metaphor, not as fable, but as literal gospel
conceived by the Holy Spirit and born in a stable?
Probably not.

But can I convince you to join me in willing suspension of disbelief
to voluntarily embrace the glorious impossibility
of God impregnating a young woman with the child of God?
Maybe.....?

I believe in the virgin birth in the same way and for the same reasons that I believe in angels.
So, what do we know about angels?

Angels are beings created by God and they are God's foot soldiers or messengers.
In scripture, only four angels have names and they are:
Gabriel, Michael, Uriah, and Raphael.
Before Jesus, angels delivered messages for God and were critically important.
In the Old Testament, angels hold a higher status than humans,
but after Jesus, that changes.

Here in the beginning of Luke's gospel,
in the infancy narrative of Jesus, we hear a lot about angels.
They foretell the births of Jesus and John the Baptist
and alert the shepherds in the fields to Jesus' birth.

God appears to us in so many ways -- some big and flashy, like the visitation of angels,
but some small and barely noticeable.

God appears to us in prayer, in visions, and through healing.

God is made manifest to us through other people, in nature, **and** by the visitation of angels.

God is mysterious. The virgin birth is a mystery.

Yet there's something about mystery that's also a little scary.

And there's definitely something about angels that's a little scary.

What do angels always say when they appear in scripture? The first words out of their mouth?
???? **Do not fear.** That's right. They always say that.

When the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary in the beginning of Luke's gospel, what does he say?
The exact same thing every angel says....."**Do not be afraid**"

They wouldn't say this if people weren't obviously terrified by their sudden appearance.

Our cultural experiences of angels are different.

Last week I heard this story,

someone told me that recently a woman just kind of appeared.

"There she was right at the moment when I needed help, she said.

I told her, "you're my angel."

Was that an angel or was that God?

How about this one?

Do you know someone who has lost an important family member?
A mother, grandparent, or sibling?
And now they consider that relative who has died to be a “guardian angel”
who looks out for and protects the living. I know I’ve heard that before.

The other day, I talked with someone
about ways in which we look for the manifestation of God in other people.
Is that looking for angels?

God made manifest in those around us.
It’s something you have to be looking for, we agreed,
and something that can be seen when you are paying attention.
It’s a type of visitation and it’s part of God’s mystery.

Mary is a great example of someone who embodied this when she said yes to the angel Gabriel.
She probably didn’t completely understand exactly what it was to which she was saying yes,
but she did it anyway.

She was willing to embrace the mystery of God.
Mary became God made manifest in her very body.
Now, how do we recognize that when it’s a little less obvious???
How can we be inspired by and find faith in Mary’s example?

I think we find inspiration in the fact that God appears in unlikely visitations and places
like the story I’m about to tell you.

I have had more than a few fascinating encounters with rational and intelligent young adults
who came to me firmly convinced they have had an encounter with a demon
and believe they are going to die.

First, I don’t think it was a demon, I think it was an angel.

So, why does this type of experience happen to young people in our society?
They are having an intense experience of God
that jolts them out of their self-centeredness, their hedonistic ways of youth
in which they have been serving a kingdom of their own making
and instead begin to realize the Kingdom of God is out there.

The reason I find this fascinating
is because we have all probably had encounters of God whether we knew it or not.
We experienced God made manifest in another person.

We were visited by an angel or we had an experience of God
or God’s presence in a very real and tangible way.

Maybe we called it a demon, maybe we called it déjà vu, or a vision, a wacky dream,
however you categorized it, maybe it was really God or an angel with a message.

When we choose to believe in the mystery of God,
whether that is the virgin birth or God’s angels,
we engage in a more fluid relationship with mystery where angels speak into our souls.

When we choose to believe in the mystery of God,

we see God manifested in the souls of others and that is a beautiful thing.

What I want to encourage you to consider isn't the argument I had with my grandfather.

It isn't the "Is it true or not?" "Fact or fiction" debate.

The question is this: Will you choose to believe God's mystery?

Will you choose to believe God's mystery?

With God ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE

and the glorious impossibility of a virgin birth is just another day in the kingdom of God.

So. I invite you to step into the kingdom.

Step right on in and engage the mystery where the impossible is possible,

where a virgin birth is a BIG DEAL, but it happens.

Step into the kingdom where angels dwell, miracles happen, and God is near.